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Torrent of grief

May 19, 2008



Kate Grenville champions the underdog. By Roger Stitson.

I BEGAN writing this article about Kate Grenville's novel of early colonial NSW, *The Secret River*, on the day Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued Federal Parliament's apology to indigenous Australians - February 13, 2008.

As with many recent works of Australian literature - *Home* (by Larissa Behrendt) and *Jackson's Track* (by Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon) have been on VCE English text lists in the past few years - *The Secret River* resonates with a long-internalised welling of sorrow, grief and despair for who we may really be as a people, for what happened along the journey, and for what we have become through our giant nation-building.

The Secret River is probably too massive in its relevance to us, too deep in its expression of horror, guilt and suffering (felt not only by central characters but the voice of narration), too fraught with ironies and too far-reaching in the way it suggests historical, factual truths from the perspective of fiction, to be confined to a discussion on "Encountering Conflict", which it has been slotted into as a context theme on the year 12 English text list.

For, in a sense, all stories are about conflict between and among individuals and groups, and within the self, internalised, externalised, repressed, physical, mental, psychological, moral and ethical, spiritual, ideological, and sometimes almost all at once, otherwise there would be no story to tell.

There may even be an intellectual and emotional form of conflict between the text and the not-so-passive readers as they struggle to come to terms with those things that confront them.

Grenville's sympathies are with the underdog, although they undergo a shift as the novel progresses towards its heart and the secret aftermath of an Aboriginal massacre on the banks of the Hawkesbury River in 1814. This is an interesting feat of writing, for in general the story's third-person narration is channelled through the consciousness of transported convict, now emancipist land-owner and businessman, William Thornhill.

Whereas he had been the oppressed, now it is the Aborigines, whom we never really know throughout the narration, who are the dispossessed and the lost. Yet all are blighted forever, for upon this shift our civilisation

is constructed.

For example, most of the first 70 pages are set in London, and the struggle for survival of the illiterate underclasses. It is a vicious, bitter, repressive place, seemingly the natural and assumed order of things, where a man and his wife (Thornhill and Sal), must steal, lie and cheat to stay alive, and if caught are sent to the Old Bailey and sentenced to death by a remote representative of the social and political elite: "A barrister fiddled with the grubby ruffles at his neck, and another got out his snuff-box. It seemed the court could scarcely be bothered to listen as William Thornhill, in the time between two heartbeats, was found guilty and sentenced."

Even when Thornhill's sentence is commuted to transportation to NSW, Grenville's narration, tone of voice and choice of imagery induce a shocked indignation, particularly in the manner in which he and Sal are impelled to grovel for clemency via a letter to Lord Hawkesbury.

The aristocrat's name is instructive; ironically, it is Thornhill who, decades later, having taken part in removing the tribal blacks from his patch of earth, banishing the survivors from their own country as he and his kind had been banished from London (or hanged by the neck until dead), transmogrifies himself into a "cut-price" lord of the Hawkesbury outside of Sydney.

Here, Grenville's view of him is more contemptuous and sardonic as he attempts to ape the British gentry back "Home".

This narrative stance begins to shift after Thornhill, Sal and their two children arrive in Sydney, when the first words he utters to an Aboriginal, standing outside his decrepit hut, are, "Be off, be off!". This stance intensifies much later when he whips his son Dick for persistently visiting an Aboriginal campsite: Time you pulled your weight, not play about with savages.

The ingrained and inherited conventions of Home are writ large in Sydney and environs; the prejudice, the intolerance, the assumptions surrounding individual ownership, property, control, order, straight lines, picket fences and high walls, are instantly replicated in the colony by abused people who know nothing different, and nothing better.

People who have been sent from their homes, in the main unwillingly, and who can only draw upon what they know to survive.

They bring their way of life with them: their grog shops, their northern hemisphere animals, their methods of cooking, building and farming the land and their ignorant and casual naming of Aborigines, some of them clearly tribal elders (Long Jack, Whisker Harry, Meg, Saucy Polly).

All of this is in contradiction to the Aboriginal mindset, customs and language, which are assumed to be inferior by dint of difference.

Schematically perhaps, Thornhill is suspended between two worlds, two ways of moving forward: the acceptance and accommodation of the local Aborigines, as exemplified by the tragic figure of Thomas Blackwood, and the absolute hatred, terror and murderous violence towards them, represented by Smasher Sullivan.

Blackwood's character is drawn sympathetically - he is the white settler who offers some form of hope, conciliation and even reconciliation, while Dick is his silent and secret inheritor. Smasher, as his name suggests, is a creature of evil. We wait in expectation for Smasher's spearing and ghastly death at the hands of

a black. Grenville even refers directly to his "comeuppance" long before it happens.

Thornhill is deeply compromised in the "taking up" (or simply the "taking") of land, the ownership, control and defence of his acreage - a vague echo, in passing, of the profit and pain derived from the importance our culture attaches to it today. At times during *The Secret River* "big black birds with unblinking yellow eyes" stare balefully down on Thornhill as he scratches out his future, prefiguring as a motif his - and the colony's - spiritual ruin. At the end he is alone, shrouded in the darkness of night and soul. Too late: it's as though he might be saying sorry.

FURTHER STUDY

- *Searching for the Secret River* (Text Publishing, 2006) is Kate Grenville's autobiographical account of how she came to write *The Secret River*, the background research required, the constant redrafting and editing of the manuscript, the development of the characters and the writing style, even an explanation for her use of italics instead of inverted commas to define dialogue. It is indispensable reading, and will be of value to all students developing their own writing activities within the Creating and Presenting section of the new year 12 English course.
- *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (directed by Phillip Noyce, 2002).

LINKS

Confusing fiction and history:

www.theage.com.au/news/books/making-a-fiction-of-history/2006/10/19/1160851069362.html

Terra Nullius and the "history wars":

www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=4141

Kate Grenville interview:

www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s1414510.htm

Bringing Them Home: www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/

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